

THE SIGNS OF APPROACHING DEATH ILLUSTRATED FROM SHAKESPEARE.

It was Cullen who gave to the profession the keynote of modern clinical medicine in his practical suggestion "to obviate the tendency to death." Bichat in his researches formulated the "Triangle of Life," and in our day we have referred all modes of death to this equilateral triangle, *i.e.*, death by the Circulation, by Respiration, by Innervation—by the Heart, Lungs, or Brain—by Asthenia, Apnoea, or Coma. These modes of death, as they have been fully described by Bichat, Alison, Watson, Aitken, and others, are so interwoven with each other in their signs that it is only by the preponderance of the phenomena in any one group that we are able to specifically refer the death to its mode. It is permissible to state here that as the earliest sign of movement in the body as evidencing life is seen in the pulsatile spot which is afterward developed into a heart, so this organ appears to be the last that is inseparably connected with life, as the cessation of its movements is one of the evidences of death. The natural mode of death—the Euthanasia—appears to be by Asthenia—the failure of the vital powers, the loss of strength in structure to perform its function, whatever it may be, and the heart appears to be the last organ to fail in its strength and to rest, as it was the first to show sensible motion as a sign of life. The phenomena of approaching death by any of these modes is made up of signs belonging to the various systems mentioned—thus the cessation of the respiration, the absence of pulse, half-closed eyelids, dilatation of the pupils, clenched jaws, protruded tongue, partial contraction of the fingers, coldness and paleness of the skin, etc., are familiar as the external or apparent signs, while evidences of putrefactive changes and the *rigor mortis* are the positive signs of somatic death, and the tendency toward any one of these conditions in a greater or lesser degree marks the approach of death. The Father of Medicine, in his book of *Prognostics*, thus refers to the signs of approaching death, and as the facial expression is particularly noted, this description has passed into the current literature of the profession as "the Hippocratic face." Hippocrates says of the physician:

"He should observe thus in acute diseases: first, the countenance of the patient, if it be like those of persons in health, and more so, if like itself, for this is the best of all; whereas the most opposite to it is

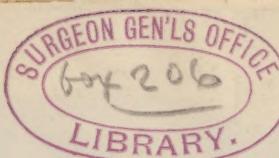
the worst, such as the following: a sharp nose, hollow eyes, collapsed temples; the ears cold, contracted, and their lobes turned out; the skin about the forehead being rough, distended, and parched; the color of the whole face being green, black, livid, or lead colored. If the countenance be such at the commencement of the disease, and if this cannot be accounted for from the other symptoms *** and if the other symptoms do not subside *** it is to be known for certain that death is at hand. And, also, if the disease be in a more advanced stage either on the third or fourth day, and the countenance be such *** the other symptoms are to be noted in the whole countenance, those on the body and those in the eyes, for if they shun the light or weep involuntarily or squint, or if the one be less than the other, or if the white of them be red, or livid, or has black veins in it; if there be a gum upon the eyes, if they are restless, protruding, or are become very hollow, and if the countenance be squalid and dark or the color of the whole face be changed—all these are to be reckoned bad and fatal symptoms. The physician should also observe the appearance of the eyes from below the eyelids in sleep; for when a portion of the white appears owing to the eyelids not being closed together *** it is to be reckoned an unfavorable and very deadly symptom, but if the eyelid be contracted, livid, or pale, or also the lip, or nose, along with some of the other symptoms one may know for certain that death is close at hand. It is a mortal symptom also when the lips are relaxed, pendant, cold, and blanched."

Thus much in detail from the sage of Cos, whose observant and analytic mind should guide all medical men in the natural historical methods of work and study of their profession.

These preliminary remarks are here set forth as being perhaps necessary to the better comprehension and understanding of what is further to be commented upon, and as affording also the data for a comparison, if need be, of the descriptions of approaching death as detailed by Shakespeare. Some reading and study of Shakespeare, with the notes and comments of Steevens, Knight, Grant White, Verplanck, Hudson, Rolfe, and others, and more especially the papers of Rockwell and Stearns upon closely allied physiological matters, have led me to gather from my scrap-book "The signs of approaching death," as Shakespeare has depicted them. In the *Winter's Tale* III, iii, Paulina thus denotes the cataleptic condition of Hermione:

"I say she's dead; I'll swear't: if word, nor oath
Prevail not, go and see: if you can bring
Tincture, or lustre, in her lip, her eye,
Heat outwardly, or breath within, I'll serve you
As I would the gods."—

In *King John* V, vii:



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Prince Henry. It is too late; the life of all his blood
Is touched corruptibly; and in his pure brain
(Which some suppose the soul's frail dwelling-house)
Doth by the idle comments that it makes
Foretell the ending of mortality.

[Enter PEMBROKE.]

Pembroke. His highness yet doth speak; and holds
belief

That, being brought into the open air,
It would allay the burning quality
Of that fell poison which assaileth him.

Prince Henry. Let him be brought into the orchard
here.—

Doth he still rage?

[Exit BIGOT.]

Pembroke. He is more patient
Than when you left him; even now he sung.

Prince Henry. O vanity of sickness! fierce extremes
In their continuance will not feel themselves.
Death, having prey'd upon the outward parts,
Leaves them insensible; and his siege is now
Against the mind, the which he pricks and wounds
With many legions of strange fantasies;
Which, in their throng and press to that last hold,
Confound themselves. 'Tis strange that death should
sing—

I am the cygnet to this pale, faint swan,
Who chants a doleful hymn to his own death;
And, from the organ pipe of frailty, sings
His soul and body to their lasting rest.

[Re-enter BIGOT and attendants, who bring in KING
JOHN in a chair.]

King John. Ay, marry, now my soul hath elbow
room;
It would not out at windows, nor at doors.
There is so hot a summer in my bosom,
That all my bowels crumble up to dust:
I am a scribbled form, drawn with a pen
Upon a parchment; and against this fire
Do I shrink up.

Prince Henry. How fares your majesty?

King John. Poison'd,—ill fare;—dead, forsook
 cast off;
And none of you will bid the winter come,
To thrust his icy fingers in my maw;
Nor let my kingdom's rivers take their course
Through my burn'd bosom; nor entreat the north
To make his bleak winds kiss my parched lips,
And comfort me with cold:—I do not ask you much,
I beg cold comfort; and you are so strait
And so ingrateful, you deny me that.

Prince Henry. Oh! that there were some virtue in
 my tears,

That might relieve you!

King John. The salt in them is hot.—
Within me is a hell; and there the poison
Is, as a fiend, confin'd to tyrannize
On unrepentable condemned blood.

There is little left out of this description to
determine that the King is suffering from cor-
rosive poisoning and will die.

In *Richard II*: I, i, Northumberland thus
describes the condition of old Gaunt:

"His tongue is now a stringless instrument,
 Words, life, and all, old Lancaster has spent."

In the first part of *King Henry IV*: V, iv:

Hotsprur. Oh! I could prophesy,
But that the earthy and cold hand of death
Lies on my tongue.

In both these instances the failure of speech
and the loss of animal temperature is noted.

The second part of *King Henry IV*: IV, v:

Prince Henry (watching by the King). By his gates
of breath
There lies a downy feather, which stirs not.
Did he suspiré, that light and weightless down
Perforce must move.

The allusion is to the absence of the expiratory movement in respiration as determined by the motion of a feather. This, with another sign to be noted further in *King Lear*, alike dependent on the expiratory movement, still continues to be accepted by the laity as an evidence of death.

The second part of *King Henry VI*: III, ii, Gloster dead in his bed :

Warwick. See, how the blood is settled in his face!
Oft have I seen a timely-parted ghost
Of ashy semblance, meagre, pale, and bloodless,
Being all descended to the laboring heart,
Who, in the conflict that it holds with death,
Attracts the same for aidance 'gainst the enemy;
Which with the heart there cools and ne'er returneth
To blush and beautify the cheek again.
But, see! his face is black and full of blood;
His eye-balls further out than when he liv'd,
Staring full ghastly, like a strangled man;
His hair uprear'd, his nostrils stretch'd with struggling;
His hands abroad display'd, as one that grasp'd
And tugged for life, and was by strength subdued.
Look on the sheets!—his hair, you see, is sticking;
His well-proportion'd beard made rough and rugged,
Like to the summer's corn by tempest lodg'd.
It cannot be but he was murder'd here;
The least of all these signs were probable.

Warwick's description of sudden death leaves but little for modern medical jurisprudence to add of the external appearances that require to be noted in such cases.

It is to be noted here that upon the first eight lines of this extract is based the claim of Shakespeare to have anticipated Harvey in the discovery of the circulation of the blood. Shakespeare was born 1564 and died 1616; Harvey was born 1578 and died 1657, and the play was published *circa* 1594-1600.

The third part of *King Henry VI*: II, vi, Clifford groans and dies:

Edward. Whose soul is that which takes her heavy
leave?

Richard. A deadly groan like life and death's de-
parting.

Warwick. Dark cloudy death o'ershades his beams
 of life,

And he nor sees, nor hears us what we say.

The groan, alluding to what is commonly called the "death agony," and the obtuse ear and glazed eye, taking no cognizance of sight or sound, as signs of impending death.

In *Richard III*: I, iv, Clarence's dream :

"O Lord! Methought what pain it was to drown!
What dreadful noise of water in mine ears!
What sights of ugly death within mine eyes!"
Brackenbury. Had you such leisure in the time of
death?

To gaze upon these secrets of the deep?
Clarence. Methought I had; and often did I strive
To yield the ghost; but still the envious flood
Kept in my soul and would not let it forth
To seek the empty, vast, and wand'ring air,
But smother'd it within my panting bulk,
Which almost burst to belch it in the sea.

The allusion in the whole of the above extract is to the rapid review of the life said to occur in persons who have experienced the phenomena of drowning and who have been resuscitated.

In *Antony and Cleopatra* V, ii:

Cæsar. If they had swallow'd poison, 'twould appear
By external swelling; but she looks like sleep. * * *

The allusion here is to a common superstition that persons poisoned swell immediately after death.

In *King Lear* V, iii, Lear with Cordelia dead in his arms:

Lear. I know when one is dead, and when one lives;
She's dead as earth—lend me a looking-glass;
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why, then she lives.

As the movement of a feather is mentioned in *Henry IV*, so here the condensation of the moisture of the breath by the cold surface of a looking-glass held near the mouth of the suspected body, the polished surface showing a film of moisture if respiration exists, is also considered by the laity as an evidence of death.

In *Romeo and Juliet* IV, i:

Friar Lawrence. * * * for no pulse shall keep
His natural progress, but surcease to beat:
No warmth, no breath, shall testify thou liv'st;
The roses in thy lips and cheeks shall fade
To paly ashes; thy eyes' windows fall,
Like death, when he shuts up the day of life;
Each part depriv'd of supple government,
Shall stiff, and stark, and cold, appear like death.

Romeo and Juliet IV, v:

Capulet. * * * Out, alas! she's cold;
Her blood is settled; and her joints are stiff;
Life and their lips have long been separated.

Romeo and Juliet V, iii:

Romeo. How oft when men are at the point of death
Have they been merry? which their keepers call
A lightning before death.

Friar Lawrence and Capulet both narrate the ordinary signs of death, and the remark of Romeo is allied to that of Pembroke in *King John*.

Romeo, King John, and Dame Quickly all note more particularly the real signs of approaching death.

I have reserved Dame Quickly's narrative of the death of Falstaff as the fitting close of this brief paper.

In *King Henry V*: II, iii:

Dame Quickly. Nay, sure, he's not in hell; he's in
Arthur's bosom, if ever man went to Arthur's bosom,
'a made a finer end, and went away, an' it had been
any Christian child; 'a parted even just between
twelve and one, e'en at turning o' the tide; for after
I saw him fumble with the sheets, and play with
flowers, and smile upon his fingers' ends, I knew there
was but one way; for his nose was as sharp as a pen,
and a' babbled of green fields. * * * So a bade
one lay more clothes on his feet; I put my hand into
the bed and felt them, and they were as cold as any
stone. * * * *

There is no need of comment. The death of Falstaff has passed into the memories of the profession as a classic description of approaching death. There is the allusion to the turning of the tide as the time of death. May not this common superstition as to the ebbing away of life have a beautiful yet tender and pathetic association with slow, resistless, yet certain ebb of the "flowing tide"? The hour of death "a parted even just between twelve and one"—near the commencement of the daily cyclical depression of the vital powers. The "fumble with the sheets," the "play with flowers," the "smile at his fingers' ends," the pinched nose, the Dame's "I knew there was but one way" and

"a babble of green fields."

He "went away." It is as real in its physiological facts as it is grand in its pathos. Before such a death scene, all the sins of the fat knight pass out of sight and remembrance, and we feel that near us is the angel of reverence as we close the reading.

P. J. Turner.